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ABSTRACT

John Willinsky's two concerns in his book "The New Literacy: Redefining Reading and Writing in the Schools" are: (1) to make school children's reading and writing into a process-oriented and productive enterprise; and (2) to change the teacher's practice from passive/autocratic to active/democratic. However, the book: (1) expects teachers and other educators to uncritically abandon past beliefs and practices in favor of the new classroom discourse; (2) harbors some faulty ideas, such as its dualistic, either/or philosophy; (3) is tied to determinism, certainty, and millenialism; (4) does not deal with the ways in which reading and writing are instruments of misinformation and propaganda; (5) gives too little attention to the question of how to teach a child to read; (6) portrays the New Literacy is in opposition to one dominant force, namely conservatism; and (7) has problems with mechanics and style. Willinsky's populist definition of literacy is "vulgar pragmatism." The index is a catalogue of names with only six topical entries, and Willinsky uses a mixture of literacy metaphors, producing ambiguity and confusion. Willinsky's New Literacy may be the New Creed, but it is not education. Small as the movement may be, the urge to spread sublime literacy throughout the world imitates past and present crusades for democracy, Christianity, communism, and every other universal, totalizing system. (RS)

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Literacy in Contexts: Perspectives from Society. Critique of "The New Literacy."

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COLLEGE READING CONFERENCE

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The New Literacy: Redefining Reading and Writing in the Schools, by John Willinsky, Boston, Routledge, 1989.

Critique

There are two general concerns in John Willinsky's book, The New Literacy: Redefining Reading and Writing in the Schools: (1) to make school children's reading and writing instruction into a process-oriented and productive enterprise and (2) to change the schoolteacher's practice from passive/autocratic to active/democratic. Employing a narrative, historical account, Willinsky's story promises theoretical and practical implications and chastises the New Literacy's major players for failing to recognize the movement's latent possibilities.

Devotees of the New Literacy may find the account absolves if not justifies their work. A critical reader may find the author misinformed or poorly informed on reading instruction issues. I find the scope to be immense. Chapters suffer from haphazard development. The theoretical perspective is ambiguous and there is indifference to philosophical and practical implications.

The theme of this critique concerns Willinsky's desire to organize an international New Literacy movement. From his viewpoint a systematized literacy education would empower the illiterate masses. I celebrate all that liberates innocents from cruelty and oppression, but I am skeptical of utopian systems claiming to eradicate social ills. Willinsky's New Literacy strikes me as education's new romanticism--populist and utopian.

The following sketch presents my critique of The New Literacy and raises additional questions.

1. The New Literacy expects teachers and other educators to abandon past beliefs and practices in favor of the new classroom discourse. Nothing from the old is of value to the new. According to Willinsky:

> "The ethnographic research conducted by the advocates of this new approach would demonstrate, above all, that students have this great potential for expression in writing, and that rather than searching for the best technique of teaching writing, we need to set up an environment in which writing can be pursued and learned as a craft of practice and experience, rather than direct instruction" (p. 56).

Proponents of the old ways are curmudgeons and right-wing conservatives. The New Literacy teachers are skilled, democratic, enlightened, and empowering--of themselves as well as children.

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Is there no reason to be skeptical about a so-called "democratic movement"? Democracy, public school teaching, and conservancy have at least one thing in common--namely, protection of majority rights and opinions. It is plausible that the "voices" the author wants to hear could be silenced by an excess of classroom socialization. One important benefit of the old practice was the abundant time for private, unexamined reflection--no matter who was in charge. This quote from Nietzsche sobers the self-righteous mentality: "Morality is just a special case of immorality." How do reading and writing teachers protect their students' private and public selves?

2. The book harbors some faulty ideas. For instance, the above argument uses the dualistic, Either/Or philosophy. Practicing the New Literacy means there is no middle ground--no grey area. Willinsky writes: "Where once, and still, the moral force of teaching literature was this urge to civilize, now the New Literacy turns to writing to enfranchise" (p. 30). In Experience and Education (1936) John Dewey drew attention to the dangers of the Either/Or philosophy while criticizing progressives and traditionalists. For example, Dewey wrote:

> "The traditional scheme is, in essence, one of imposition from above and from outside. It imposes adult standards, subject-matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity....the newer schools tend to make little or nothing of organized subject-matter of study; to proceed as if any form of direction and guidance by adults were an invasion of individual freedom, and as if the idea that education should be concerned with the present and future meant that acquaintance with the past has little or no role to play in education (1938, 4, 9-10).

Both movements were suffering from the blindness of dogma: traditionalists for their belief in established orders and progressives for a romanticized childhood. Neither side saw any good in the opponent's view. Instead of total rejection, total conversion, and total replacement, Dewey would salvage the best from each view and creatively rejoin these elements for a new school. He advocated a thoughtful, reflective way to resolve educational problems. Although Willinsky calls attention to the progressive movement, he does not recognize Dewey's main point. Teachers should study the progressive era and at least avoid developing their principles negatively.

3. Another concern is the book's apparent ties to determinism, certainty, and millennialism. If all is finally organized and performed in accordance with the new order, then one day there will be a perfect form of instruction in every classroom--The New Literacy.

On determinism and certainty Willinsky writes:

> "I use the term 'work' to stress the sense in which literacy can be understood as a social practice that takes certain materials and turns them to certain ends in a given setting, an activity that takes up a place in a life, as working on something does" (p. 6).

Millennialism is a period of prevailing virtue or great happiness or perfect government or freedom from familiar ills and imperfections of human existence. Willinsky's words on this subject have a missionary's zeal:

> "By taking up the range of its positions in the teaching of writing, reading, and literature in the first part of the book, I would prepare the way for a critical coming to terms with the issues of meaning, self, history, and politics which makes up the second part of the book" (p. 13).

Again:

> "...the next step is to learn more from the larger context of writing in the world, as literacy is the constant site of social struggle, empowerment, and disenfranchisement" (p. 47).

And again:

> "...the teacher in the New Literacy becomes the literary agent, editor, and publisher--again note the emulation of the real world of writing--but added to this is a final element of commingled roles, as the teacher also becomes a student of writing and begins to risk that bland page in search of another voice not often heard in the classroom. And the student, in turn, becomes the teacher" (p. 48).

Again:

> "But to that private realm to which the New Literacy has sought to open the classroom, there needs to be added the public elements of the classroom as a community of readers and writers, of reading as the beginning of an exchange that encompasses larger communities, that can form the basis of engagement and critical challenge. And once the social bond among these readers is grasped, then this literacy can also be seen as a reading that dares to reach out into the world" (p. 89).

And in the same vein:

> "The workshop settings...are motivated by more than a desire to foster the individual's story. They represent a common, critical project in the social dimensions of literacy and voice that begins with the students' own situation as writers and readers. Without the development of this critical element in the New Literacy, learning through expressive writing and the writing process, through conferences and workshops, will continue to leave much of the world untold" (p. 56).

What would happen if the New Literacy movement humbly mapped out its theoretical and practical limits?

4. The book does not deal with the ways in which reading and writing have been and continue to be instruments of misinformation and propaganda. The author acknowledges the suppression of literacy in 16th century British laws (pp. 185-187). However, both sides of this issue are important for answering these questions: Why read? Why write? and Why teach literacy? Through neglect the author creates an impression that reading and writing are ends instead of simply means to further ends. Also, the author risks the simplistic notion that learning to read and write is innocent and panacean. In The Crooked Timber of Humanity (1991) Isaiah Berlin observes that writing has served evil purposes and, retrospectively, can be read to trace origins of inhumanity, such as fascism. One lesson in Berlin's essay is that literature, like all art forms, is a powerful vehicle for good or ill. Another lesson is that asking the right questions in the ephemeral present is an exceedingly difficult intellectual and moral act. How and with what trepidation should teachers go beyond the mechanics of reading and writing? Why?

5. The author gives too little attention to this question: How do I teach a child to read? In an effort to answer this question, Willinsky uses himself as an example. The attempt is unconvincing.

> "Yet as I began to write this chapter, I also had the chance to look across the room to my youngest son sitting and reading to his mother. He read and stumbled along, not much enamored by the stories, except at odd moments; but then neither were we thoroughly engrossed in listening to this plodding through the ways of a little bear. In this way, he cautioned me against writing this chapter as if reading were something that children just step into, like talking or walking. The New Literacy can make it seem that way at times, and it is undoubtedly like that for a number of children, but not, by any means for all of them. (Yet by the final draft of this book some months later, my son seems to have lost most of the hesitation in his reading and has begun writing and illustrating comic books that he is able to sell to his older brothers.)" (p. 67)

Few teachers would say that skills or techniques should have primary--much less transcendent--importance over artistic or theoretical concerns. At the same time, most teachers would say that their educational practice depends on reflective thought about worthwhile knowledge and appropriate organization of specific and useful skills. Thoughtful curriculum planning is the crux of reflective practice. Leaving everything up to the students is abdicating responsibility or--worse--subverting and undermining legitimate cultural processes. What do people in the skills camps have to offer people in the process camps? How can these different camps interact on school and university levels for the improvement of reading and writing instruction?

6. Willinsky portrays the New Literacy in opposition to one other force--the darkness, storms, and dominance of conservatism. Here are his words:

> "An umbrella may be a particularly apt metaphor for the process of pulling together these programs, if only because they must weather continuing indifference, if not outright opposition, from the

elements of political conservatism that continue to hold sway on the educational front. The times are not entirely conducive to the liberal inclinations of the New Literacy" (p. 5).

It seems fitting to identify dogmatism with conservatism (i.e. traditional teachers) because of its predominantly authoritative teaching style. However, virtues and vices have no limits and wear many disguises. There have been benign and not-so-benign results from so-called humanism and scientism. Indeed, behaviorism and humanism have been coupled to produce insidious forms of social control. In The Children's Story: But Not Just for Children (1963), James Clavell helps one understand the negative, subversive control that is always possible in teaching--with or without the teacher's awareness. How does the empowered, autonomous teacher avoid dogmatism? How will New Literacy teachers' respect the children's right to know their world? How should teachers, students, principals, parents, and school boards work out their school ethic?

7. The New Literacy has problems with mechanics and style. The book gives no assistance with chapter titles that have more to do with cuteness than substance: "Writing in the Real," "Literature in Response," and "Critical Futures." Also, within chapters the author flits from one topic to another and sacrifices a coherent discussion. Some paragraphs are a jumble of metaphors mixed for a single point. The style is boring and the language is abstruse. Reading is a dogged process to confusion.

Here is an example of a paragraph wherein the author mixes metaphors:

> "If for many of us, the seeds of the New Literacy were planted during the 1960's reawakening of progressive education, the program has taken shape within this climate of educational restraint and crisis....On the other hand the New Literacy also shows signs that it has brought itself on stream in educating the young for the new corporate age" (p. 19).

Another example:

> "...the writer now faces becoming an onion, as self-exploratory writing is a peeling back of the layers revealing only other, inner leaves, one after the other, no truer or more certain than those on the surface, but more translucent, slippery, and no less tearful, perhaps, in the peeling....At this point the New Literacy is happily heading down the road, on track with literacy, perhaps, slowing down for school zones and always with an eye on the rearview mirror; given the enthusiasm of advocates of these programs, the whole thing seems top-down and driven by the feel of the wind in the hair....A true shift in the nature of literacy, on the scale which the New Literacy has brought forward, has ramifications that spill over the edges of the classroom, that go beyond the promise of better motivated students in language arts and English classes" (pp. 23-24).

And another example:

> "The New Literacy has invested heavily in the rhetoric of individual expression and voice. It has happily taken the personal and the public aspects of literacy to consist of a one-way street; the individual finds a vehicle in writing for those deep and hidden thoughts at the core of the self and goes increasingly public with them" (p. 208)

On the desire to create a system called The New Literacy, Willinsky writes these abstruse sentences:

> "For want of this public sense of a common cause, for what might be gained by comparing notes on a shared approach to education, I feel justified in reaching with a free hand across the international educational community to pull together this particular array of programs under a single title. The strength of the connections among them is part of this book's argument, as is the fact that each of these innovations falls within a much larger educational phenomenon than a simple adding up of the different reading and writing strategies would suggest" (p. 3).

In the same strain, here are the author's words concerning reading lessons:

> "But to that private realm to which the New Literacy has sought to open the classroom, there needs to be added the public elements of the classroom as a community of readers and writers, of reading as the beginning of an exchange that encompasses larger communities, that can form the basis of engagement and critical exchange. And once the social bond among these readers is grasped, then this literacy can also be seen as a reading that dares to reach out into the world" (p. 89).

What happened to the editing--the crap detecting phase? Or is the New Literacy just for kids?

Willinsky's Definition of Literacy

Becoming literate, being literate, and teaching literacy are, first of all, political acts. Willinsky's definition of literacy is vulgar pragmatism, that is, the rationalization of social patterns to make people and institutions into particular forms. In a word, populist.

He writes:

> Literacy is the "constant site of social struggle, empowerment, and disenfranchisement" (p. 47).

Again:

> "The ways in which literacy is controlled and contested within the established order of things should not be eschewed as a topic for

> a program concerned with students learning the ways of language and literacy. Producing creative works for public distribution is learning how the market operates and regulates, how the production of discourse and silence is managed with great dexterity" (p. 237).

From Willinsky's perspective mechanical aspects of reading and writing are non-problematic, except for a few special cases. Willinsky makes his decision about breaking code based upon observing his young son's reading of Little Bear books.

(The example of his child reading: p.4, item 5.)

Also, the author suggests that existing problem readers are attributable to the old literacy. He writes:

> "With a certain degree of idealism, I am pressing for a New Literacy that is not totally absorbed in overcoming such malaises as writer's block in the English classroom or boredom in the face of reading an assigned novel" (p. 22).

Willinsky's definition of literacy holds that reading and writing are meaning-getting-making exercises that enable an individual to discover the self. Here are his words:

> "In each case, the idea is to study and realize literacy as a social phenomenon, a work out of which there is a meeting of meanings, as the text is written to convey a sense of things and as a reader turns to it and to other readers to make a greater sense of things....In this way, students might be better prepared to defend the realms of meanings that they are interested in pursuing or in the works of others, but also to understand the external contexts which can further shape the sense of texts" (p. 88).

If this is literacy, some students might prefer to be illiterate and sensible rather than conditioned to read and write turgid prose.

Additional Notes

1. The index is a catalogue of names.

Other than the names of men and women who are either friendly or unfriendly to the cause of the New Literacy, there are only six topical entries:

Literacy, Literature, New Literacy, Reading, Teachers, and Writing.

What does this suggest about the preparation of this book? What does it add to the author's definition of literacy?

2. The author uses a mixture of literacy metaphors.

Human being is an ordered experience from simple to complex, suggesting a stage theory of growth and development. He writes:

"...in order for literacy to be an effective part of the student's lives, it has to be integrated into their culture as a way of opening it to a wider world; literacy, in this sense, is defined not be learning the terms of cultural literacy, but by how it is lived from childhood into membership in the larger literate community" (p. 157).

Religion becomes a metaphor for Willinsky through his emphasis on culture. Cult is the root form of culture, meaning great devotion to a person, idea, or thing, especially such devotion regarded as a literary or intellectual fad.

Willinsky writes:

Literacy is "a community and cultural practice that takes on the spirit and aspirations of those who live within it" (p.)

And again:

"In each case, the idea is to study and realize literacy as a social phenomenon, a work out of which there is a meeting of meanings, as the text is written to convey a sense of things and as a reader turns to it and to other readers to make a greater sense of things....In this way, students might be better prepared to defend the realms of meanings that they are interested in pursuing or in the works of others, but also to understand the external contexts which can further shape the sense of texts" (p. 88).

The author also uses trades, like carpentry, to build his image of literacy. He writes:

"To begin to gain a sense of what is being revitalized in the case of the New Literacy, it would be helpful to imagine literacy as a way of working the world....I use the term 'work' to stress the sense in which literacy can be understood as a social practice that takes certain materials and turns them to certain ends in a given setting, an activity that takes up a place in a life, as working on something does. In this scheme of things, as I will reiterate throughout this book, literacy is better understood <u>not</u> as an isolated skill, as something one can do on demand, but as a social process in the daily landscape; one works with someone else's writing or writes for another under a roof of one sort or another in building something that will be of use to yourself or others. Although I will go on to make much more of literacy as a psychological and political event in this book, I want to begin with this initial belabored conception of it. This regard for literacy as actively making something of the world is part of the reorientation that is necessary to appreciate the New Literacy project" (p. 6).

The variety of metaphors clashes with Willinsky's advocacy of growth as the New Literacy's central, biology metaphor. Ambiguity and confusion are the results.

Closing Remarks

Willinsky aims to improve children's reading and writing instruction. His solution: politicize literacy for an international movement. Systems and orders easily hobble the innocents. Willinsky would sacrifice children's art, culture, and education for his adult politics. More important for children's education than discovering the New World Order for Literacy is releasing their art and aesthetics.

There is something in me that rails against every imposition--every order. I trust no one who claims to have found "The Answer." This is where I stand in relation to French deconstructionists and their critics: skepticism--yes; dogmatism--no. Most of the time I study things; talk to friends; read poetry, drama, and history; listen to folk, jazz, rock, and classical music; watch movies; hope, dream, and argue liberal-ironist causes; and occasionally go out for a damn good time. I tend to avoid reading trade books like this one, but those are my tastes.

Without some kind of order, discourse is meaningless. Yet, the world would benefit from lessening universal orders. To my mind Paul Feyerabend's position is the most hopeful. Radical is not the militancy of one group against another, but the invitation "merely to think." A student should enjoy learning without oppressive demagogs and their popular "ideological prisons." Educators should say: to hell with politics and politicians.

If teaching and learning require membership in a cult devoted to social determinism and conformism, then Willinsky's New Literacy may be The New Creed--but it is not education. Small as the movement may be, the urge to spread sublime literacy throughout the world imitates present and past crusades for Democracy, Christianity, Communism, and every other Universal, Totalizing System. Think about it. In Sophocles's play, Antigone, the chorus chants: "All devices are man's and never does the future find him at a loss. Of subtlety passing belief are the achievements of his skill, and they lead him at times to good, but at times to evil."

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